

Murray Pommerance and R. Barton Palmer, eds

Thinking in the Dark. Cinema, Theory, Practice

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In the continuously growing flow of anthologies, readers, textbooks, and handbooks on film theory, the collection edited by Pommerance and Palmer is one of the most original and refreshing ones that I have read since many years. The key features of the book's project are as simple as they are sound and necessary in an era of ever expanding specialization and focusing on technical and terminological discussions. First of all, the authors healthily remind us of the fact that film theory is more than just an established discipline. It should be envisaged instead as "serious writing about the cinema" (p. 1), and thus include the voices of many so-called non-specialists who have great things to say on film without for that reason considering themselves film theorists (perhaps the last great representative of this strand is Stanley Cavell, who occupies a much deserved place in this volume). Second, Pommerance and Palmer also insist on the fact that the critical thinking of these serious authors cannot be reduced to a certain number of concepts or categories, each of them neatly pigeonholed in the overall system of film theory. On the contrary, they claim, one should emphasize the personal framework of each thinker that eventually produces new and inspiring ideas on thinking of cinema. Third and finally, and this is as well is something that should be warmly welcomed, the editors also foreground their reluctance to critical methods that select their material according to the needs of congealed categorizations and big theories, where authors are used to provide us with excerpts illuminating this or that singular concept or theoretical issue.

The editorial project of Pommerance and Palmer implements these claims in a very simple but original way. Their book is the chronologically arranged overview of 21 key thinkers on cinema, not all of them specialists of film theory but without exception excellent thinkers whose work has proven crucial to the field. These thinkers are not presented via their key

texts, as would be the case in a reader or an anthology, but through articles by contemporary scholars (with a good mix of famous and not yet famous names). Nor is this presentation limited to the mere contributions of these key thinkers to film theory: the chapters try to highlight the place of thinking on cinema in a broader context, which can be extremely diverse (in certain cases, the biography of the key thinker will occupy a central place; in other cases, the rest of her or his theoretical and critical reflections will be taken into account; in all cases, the contributors accept the challenge to make clear how each author of serious writing on cinema is always establishing a dialogue with previous and contemporary theories, practices, and above all films). Finally, the presentation of the 21 authors (from Münsterberg to Butler) pays also great attention to determine the practical value of the selected authors and themes. For each author, the contributors try to show, first, how he or she produces a new insight on the specificity of cinema and, second, how this insight helps reader concrete works (in order to stress the validity of the themes and insights selected, each chapter applies them to a film that is contemporary to the period of the author under scrutiny as well as to a more recent film).

The selection of authors and films is not always a big surprise, although one cannot underline enough the editors' efforts to exceed the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon theory (most chapters treat of European, more specifically French authors, some of them typical usual suspects such as Jacques Lacan and André Bazin, others only known to specialists such as Jean Epstein and Jean Douchet). The same applies to the films that are chosen to illustrate the themes and concepts (there is a lot of Spielberg, Hitchcock, or Welles in the line-up). But the mainstream selection of authors and examples powerfully underscores the great originality of the project. What we read on most authors is not simply a new summary of their work on cinema, but often less known dimensions and aspects of it, and the concrete film readings, which do not pretend to offer complete analyses of the works, aptly exhibits the interest of a new reading in light of a specific insight. True, certain chapters do contain a general presentation of some author's general film theory and not all of them propose in-depth readings of filmic material, but these are the exceptions and in general the result of Pommerance's and Palmer's strong editorial hand is very convincing. Their work does not only allow for a new approach of sometimes overstudied authors (the chapter on Lacan, by Dominic Lennard, is a real disclosure from this point of view, but the same applies to other

chapters such as the one on Eisenstein, by Matthew Solomon, who relies on the notion of “animation” to make an original return on Spielberg’s *The Adventures of Tintin*). It also brings back authors and themes that seemed to have lost some of their urgency, such as Cavell’s fundamental notion of “automatism” (cleverly presented and exemplified by Daniel Morgan). And it pays a much deserved tribute to certain authors whose works have never been sufficiently acknowledged. The big discovery in this book is without any doubt the fascinating work of V.F. Perkins, whose “aesthetic suspense” is admirably studied and illustrated by Alex Clayton (the idea of aesthetic suspense has to do with the awareness that a director is not obliged to do what he or she is doing, technically and stylistically speaking, so that the spectator is confronted with a situation in which the director’s work is taking the risk to do too much –and therefore collapse as artificial, ridiculous, or even worse). But on the other hand there are also good discoveries to make in the return to authors we thought we knew too well, such as André Bazin or Walter Benjamin or in the filmic rereading of authors who hardly addressed visuality, such as for example Michel Foucault, whose work on imprisonment, power and the construction of the self is beautifully reframed by Tom Conley in a brilliant comparison of Bresson’s *A Man Escaped* and Chandor’s *All Is Lost*.

All in all, *Thinking in the Dark. Cinema, Theory, Practice* is a sound and solid contribution to film studies. It displays the useful interaction of theory and methodology, since the new theoretical insights gained by the contributors of this volume are the direct result of methodological choices that some may judge too simple (reading texts rather than using texts in order to exemplify a theory; accepting the dependence of filmic insights on non-filmic contexts; focusing on the specificity of objects rather than looking for general laws), but that prove dramatically efficient and stimulating.

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